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The Sound of
A Voice

By Keith Gordon

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They met first in the dusk of a June evening, and, as Mrs. Stanton said, it looked like a sheet and pillowcase party. The drawing room was ghostly with pictures, statuary and chandeliers draped in white muslin, the furniture bulking awkwardly in its summer linen.

Lansing had dropped in to see the Stantons and say goodby, and soon after Mrs. Audley, who was, it transpired, to sail with them on the morrow, was ushered in. She hesitated for a moment in the doorway, a tall, slender, unsubstantial figure in white. Then as they rose and Mrs. Stanton stepped forward to greet her she spoke, and the obdurate heart of Richard Lansing fell, without a sound, without a flutter of resistance, a willing captive to the most exquisite voice he had ever heard.

In the flow of small talk that followed he was strangely silent, floating, as it were, on the music of that voice, with its beautiful modulations and strange, minor pitch. He scarcely heard what she said. Indeed, with a voice like that, words became ridiculously unimportant.

Rallied by Mrs. Stanton upon his silence, he replied to her banter awkwardly and with an effort, like a man aroused from a dream. Later, when Mrs. Audley rose to go, she extended her hand to him frankly. Then she drifted out into the glimmering light of the hall, followed by Stanton, who went to put her in her cab.

The moment they were out of hearing Lansing turned to his hostess, with highwayman-like directness.

"Where is Mr. Audley?" he asked sententiously, with a grim determination to know the worst without delay.

"Really, Dick?" she mocked. "Is the foremost bachelor of our set 'taking notice' at last? How very interesting!"

"Where is Mr. Audley?" he repeated doggedly.

"Dead these three years," she answered. Then at the long breath that she heard him take in the soft gloom of the room she added warningly, "But Penelope has many suitors."

She had indeed so many that Lansing used to wonder afterward by what miracle she had been preserved for him. It was six months before he saw,



MRS. STANTON STEPPED FORWARD TO GREET HER.

or, rather, heard, her again. A death in his family and the precarious state of the great business that he managed prevented him from carrying out his first mad scheme of following her pell-mell across the Atlantic and as many continents and parts of continents as need be.

After the first few weeks faithless Mrs. Stanton had ceased to keep him informed of their whereabouts. But, though Edith Audley seemed to have drifted beyond his ken, that rare, caressing voice still sounded in his ears, and in dreams he saw again that straight, slim, unsubstantial figure, the face a mere pale phantom from which two shadowy eyes looked out.

It was just before the Christmas holidays, and Lansing had decided that nothing should keep him longer, that in spite of fate he would sail for Europe within the next ten days, when the tinkle of the telephone bell aroused him. He lifted the receiver to his ear, and at the sound that greeted him he felt as if a flame of happiness ran over him.

"Is this 332 Cortlandt?"

The voice was unmistakable. Though the wires imparted generously of their own metallicness, it was still the most beautiful voice in the world. Unlike Trilby's right foot, which had a rival in her left, Mrs. Audley's voice had no rival. Lansing was as certain that it was she who was speaking as he was that it was himself who was listening.

"This is 332," he began.

Before he could get further there was a despairing exclamation from the other end of the wire, while the only voice in the world pleaded, "Won't you please ring off?"

Lansing laughed delightedly, but that laugh cost him his chance.

"How are you, Mrs. Audley?" he began, but a buzz, buzz-z, buzz-z-z-z, buzz-z-z-z was all that he got for his pains. Nor did his frantic ringing nor the things he said to central avail him. "Don't know, sir. Can't find out," was all that the distant, impassive voice of the operator vouchsafed, and with a sigh of exasperation he at last hung up the receiver.

She was back in the city then. Somewhere in the wilderness of brick and stone that incomparable voice was making music, but not for him. Suddenly Mrs. Stanton's warning remark fell upon his ears as if it had been spoken by some invisible presence.

"Penelope has many suitors."

The thought goaded him. While he tarried, allowing mere life and death matters to detain him, what might not have happened? The truth came to him now with a terrible, crushing force. The one thing in life greater than all other things was love. And, strange and unnatural as it might seem, he loved with all his heart a woman whom he had practically never seen, since that brief, dim half hour in the Stanton drawing room seemed more like an encounter of souls than an actual meeting, where the sweet, strong woman of her had been revealed to him in that strange, vibrant, caressing voice.

Inquiry at the Stanton residence did not put him forward. They were still in Europe, and the housekeeper did not know when they would return. Nor could she tell him anything of Mrs. Audley.

Baffled, but determined, he left no stone unturned for the next three weeks, but without success. Edith Audley seemed to have disappeared in the crowd of the unknown, and he wondered if that fool Stanton would ever bring his wife back from Europe.

Then, in the most casual manner, the information that he had sought in vain came to him. Waiting moodily for a friend in the Turkish room of the Waldorf late one afternoon, the strident repetition of a name at last recalled him to his whereabouts.

"Symington! Mr. Symington!" sang out a call boy in a nasal tone, looking inquiringly about as he sauntered through the room.

None of the men scattered about the room responded, and the boy tried another tack.

"Card for Mrs. Audley! Card for Mrs. Audley!" he reiterated, with an expression that implied that the fellow who had sent his card to that lady must be trying to conceal himself. Then suddenly a gentleman near the door beckoned to him energetically.

"Mr. Symington?" demanded the boy. At the gentleman's negative reply he looked away very weary. But when the latter, pressing a quarter in to his hand, asked a certain question he replied with mitigated severity.

Lansing's first impression of her when at last she came toward him in broad daylight was that she was like a reed. The eyes were dark and a trifle wistful, the mouth wide, flexible, with thin, vivid lips. And then that moving voice fell upon his ears for the third time, and he only knew that she was all that he had ever dreamed of in woman—and more.

"Talk to me! Talk to me!" he would beg playfully during the weeks that followed, when he was trying with all the arts he could master to lead her to the point that he had reached at a bound.

"I'm growing jealous of my own voice," she said to him at last, with a hurt, questioning look in her eyes. "I sometimes think that it isn't my friendship that you care for at all, but it's only that my voice appeals to you, touches some chord in you. I don't just like it."

And it was then that Lansing told her, told her with an ardor that she could not doubt, ending with, "Your voice, my darling, is the most beautiful thing in the world, but it's beautiful because it is you put into sound." And, being but a woman, what could she do but believe?

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